



Pima County park memorializing Jewish teen is community-wide effort

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Over the past several years, a moribund stretch of Tucson terrain near River Road west of Dodge has been slowly turned into the city's newest gem: the Brandi Fenton Memorial Park, which will open to the public Dec. 4.

All who knew her recall Brandi Fenton as a jewel herself: a 13-year-old girl distinguished by her love for life, compassion for others and gorgeous smile. When she was killed in a car accident in March 2003, her parents, Jon and April Fenton, initiated conversations with Pima County about creating a park that would not only honor Brandi's memory, but would offer a unique and meaningful setting for others to enjoy, as well as find comfort when mourning loved ones who have died.

Pima County had limited funds available for the development of parks, so Jon, with the encouragement and support of close friends, told the county he would raise money privately to help build the park. Since that time, contributions from family members, friends, business colleagues, school children and "good people who care about Tucson" have raised more than 1.5 million dollars which, together with the bond money approved in May 2004 for parks and recreation, has turned this dream into a reality, says Jon.

"From its inception, people got involved because they cared about the issue; and because they cared, there was an instant connection between us, even among people who barely knew each other. People whom I hardly knew were



Artist Gail Roberts at the wall honoring donors to the Brandi Fenton Memorial Park.

more generous than I ever could have imagined, giving of their time, talents and funds," he says.

The park is unique for many reasons, one of which is that

it is a collaborative effort between Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation, Pima County Cultural Resources and Historic Preservation and the many dedicated private individuals, businesses and charities that worked together for the past three years. "This is a premier park and its creation was unlike anything that Pima County has ever done. It will stand as a landmark for Pima County," says Pima County Supervisor Ann Day. "The park is special because it contains modern equipment but retains the historic flavor of its past."

"It's the largest public-private partnership we've ever had," says County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, "and it's ahead of its time." The project is partially the result of planning that began with the Rillito Corridor Study in the early 1980s, says Huckelberry, who praises the collaborations that have brought it into existence. "Jon approached us about doing something to memorialize Brandi and Yoram Levy was involved early on and helped broker important contributions. It was such a great opportunity to do something positive for the whole community."

But the park is more than just a rare partnering between individuals and the county; it is greater than the numerous ideas, designs and plans that went into the brick and mortar of its ramadas, soccer fields, splash park and equestrian arena. The Brandi Fenton Memorial Park is a celebration of life, hope and a generosity of spirit, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the memorial garden.

As you approach the garden's entrance, your gaze is im-

See Fenton, page 7



Brandi Fenton Memorial Park set to open ... page 3

FENTON

continued from page 21

mediately drawn to the lively yellows, oranges and blues of the donor wall, which hosts 79 plaques of butterflies and wildflowers of the Southwest, each individually designed and crafted by Gail T. Roberts Studio to acknowledge the donors who made the park possible. The tranquility of the garden — its fountain, benches and desert plants, many of which were chosen to attract the butterflies that Brandi loved — beckons those who come in search of inspiration, beauty, meditation and rest. But perhaps the most impressive feature is the monument wall containing the Tree of Life, honoring organ donors such as Brandi and their families, with an enormous metal-sculptured butterfly created by T. A. Caid Industries floating above it.

Diane Miller, a volunteer and member of the board of directors of Donor Network of Arizona, and a liver recipient herself, captured the importance of organ donations when she spoke about the park. "When someone dies, especially a young child, you struggle to find meaning, to make sense of their death. You can give the greatest gift possible when you give the gift of life by donating their organs, so that others may live on."

The image of the Tree of Life is at the heart of Jewish spirituality. It represents the Torah, the source and inspiration for Jewish thinking, living and being. The park's Tree of Life is a work of art composed of hundreds of hand-made clay tiles forming the

tree and its branches, which spread across the wall with leaves, flowers, birds and butterflies. Gail Roberts, the artist who designed and created the tree, has been overwhelmed by the nearly two dozen volunteers who have approached her over the past two years wanting to be involved in the project in some way.

"The studio was transformed by this project," says Roberts, "and so was I. Art has become more to me than just making beautiful things. I have come to understand the power of creating art in collaboration with different minds and spirits and the grander visions which can be accomplished. Each person who came brought something special to the studio; their ideas, energy, wisdom, and unique abilities. And because many of the volunteers knew and loved Brandi and her family, we connected as a community and talked about deeper issues, like what gives our own lives meaning and purpose."

Jewish tradition teaches us "not to separate ourselves from the community" and reminds us that "each one of us is responsible for the other," says Roberts. Building community is what the Brandi Fenton Memorial Park is all about. It stands as testimony to what makes Tucson such a remarkable place to live and is proof of what can emerge when people join together for the purpose of creating something positive, something meaningful, and something that will endure as a life-affirming legacy for Tucsonans for generations to come.

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